

Virtuous wife (1)—her general description

Having spent six weeks addressing the narrowed subject of male spiritual leadership, I want to spend the next several weeks addressing the broader subject of a virtuous wife—to this end we'll be using Proverbs 31:10-31 as our primary source to consider this magnificent woman—a virtuous wife...

Before we come directly to our study let me begin by suggesting several of my goals or purposes in this study—while my direct purpose is to instruct and encourage ladies who are presently wives, I also want to make application to husbands, fathers, young ladies, and young men, as the subject has far-reaching implications for these as well—[1] husbands, in learning what your wives ought to be you will be better equipped to assist her in this endeavor, [2] fathers, you will become more knowledgeable in rearing your daughters, [3] young ladies you will find various traits that you ought to be fostering, and [4] young men, you will find necessary attributes essential to a potential wife...

- I. A General Introduction
- II. A Summary Description

I. A General Introduction

A. Its author

1. We learn from v1 that the words of this chapter are those of king Lemuel—“the words of King Lemuel, the utterance which his mother taught him...”
2. Who this man was we have no idea—some have suggested that it was simply another name given to Solomon by his mother...
3. This was the opinion of the Geneva footnotes—“That is, of Solomon who was called Lemuel, that is, of God, because God had ordained him to be king over Israel...”
4. Others suggest that he—“was a prince of some neighboring country, whose mother was a daughter of Israel, perhaps of the house of David, and taught him these good lessons...”
5. Furthermore we learn—“the words of King Lemuel, the utterance which his mother taught him...”—thus while these are the actual words of king Lemuel, they are in fact the words of his mother as taught him in his youth...
6. The word rendered “utterance” by the NKJ “prophecy” by the KJV and “oracle” by the NAS—typically refers to a divinely given word from God...
7. Thus we find that these are the direct words of King Lemuel, as taught him by his mother, who received them from God...

B. Its structure

1. Verses 10-32 comprise 22 verses, one verse for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet—a practice common to parents as a means to instruct their children...
2. This would seem to indicate that these verses were taught Lemuel in his youth, something implied in v1 —“the words of king Lemuel, the utterance which his mother taught him...”
3. It seems probable that Lemuel had been taught these things from his youth and may even repeat them here by memory...
4. Elizabeth George—“Once upon a time there was a young prince who would someday be king, but he had many lessons to learn before then. So his mother sat down with him beside the hearth at home and taught him not only how to be a godly king but also how to find an outstanding wife...perhaps due to her son's young age, this wise mother organizes the list of qualities he is to look for in a wife according to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Taught this way, this alphabet of character could be quickly learned, easily memorized, regularly recited, and permanently etched into the tablet of his young heart. When the mother reached the last letter of the alphabet and finished extolling the qualities of a virtuous woman, this ode of praise became for that young prince—and for us—God's alphabet of feminine character...”

C. Its interpretation

1. Here I refer to the fact that the descriptions of this virtuous woman are couched in a specific historical and cultural setting...
2. Thus in order for us to grasp the Holy Spirit's purpose in any given verse, we must seek to discern the intended virtue or grace...
3. For example, v21—"she is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. [v24] She makes linen garments and sells them. And supplies sashes for the merchants..."
4. Here we find that a virtuous woman makes her own tapestry of fine purple linen, and sells them as sashes for the merchants...
5. Now is this to mean that unless you do this you are not a virtuous woman—I certainly hope not, as I don't think I know any lady who does...
6. But the purpose of these verses is to describe this woman as an industrious and diligent provider for her home...
7. Thus we must seek to understand the basic virtue or intended grace, and contextualize it to our present historical and cultural setting...
8. Furthermore we must keep in mind that not every stage allows a woman to give equal emphasis to every responsibility...
9. For example, to impose every thing within these 22 verses upon a young mother with 2 or 4 young children may be a bit unrealistic...
10. Thus it seems best to understand this passage as setting forth the ideal wife, in a diversity of functions, throughout the various stages or seasons of life beneath the sun...

Obs.1—mothers must instruct their sons and daughters

1. This is a timely application given the fact that we just spent several weeks underscoring the reasonability of fathers to instruct their homes...
2. Here we find the great truth that while fathers are the primary prophet within the home, mothers are not to remain silent...
3. We find this more directly in v26—"she opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness..."
4. Notice three things in particular—[1] mothers are to instruct both their sons and daughters, Prov.1:8—"Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching..."
5. Matthew Henry—"It is the duty of mothers, as well as fathers, to teach their children what is good, that they may do it, and what is evil, that they may avoid it; when they are young and tender they are most under the mother's eye, and she has then an opportunity of molding and fashioning their minds well, which she ought not to let slip..."
6. Notice [2] mothers are to instruct their sons and daughters on all subjects—notice king Lemuel's mother taught him what he was to look for in a potential wife...
7. Some would have us believe that parents should have nothing to do with such topics—as if we are to simply leave our children to the providence of God...
8. But my brethren, I trust you know that the providence of God is no enemy to prayerful preparation—would we simply leave them to providence with reference to their salvation...
9. No, we should not, and neither should we simply leave them to providence with reference to finding or choosing a potential mate...
10. In fact I suggest to you that Lemuel's mother not only taught her son what to look for in a wife, but she likely prayed for him for a wife...
11. Notice v2—"what, my son? And what, son of my womb? And what, son of my vows..."—that is, son of my prayers...
12. Charles Bridges—"If thou wouldst have, Christian mother, thy child a Samuel or an Augustine, be thyself a Hannah or a Monica. The child of thy prayers, of thy vows, and of thy tears, will be in the Lord's best time the child of thy praises, thy rejoicings, [and] thy richest consolation..."

13. Notice [3] mothers are to enlist all means to instruct their children—this mother mingled religious instruction with grammatical instruction...
14. This of course is one of the many benefits of home instruction—I can remember listening to my wife teach my daughters their ABC's—A is for Adam, B is for Bible, etc...
15. And so too this dear godly lady used her native alphabet to instruct her young prince in the essentials of a potential wife...

II. A Summary Description

A. She is foremostly a God-fearer

1. Here I refer to v30—“charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised...”
2. We must forever eradicate the erroneous view that the woman here described is some super-woman or some super-Christian...
3. No—what we find here is a God-fearing woman—this reality serves as the foundation beneath all of her activities...
4. What does it mean to fear God—well, I know of no better definition of gospel fear, then the one given by John Brown—“It is the disposition that considers the smile of God our greatest delight and the frown of God our greatest dread...”
5. Simply put to fear God is to know God as God—it's to know God as a God of holiness, righteousness, mercy, grace, and love...
6. Prov.9:10—“The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One *is* understanding...”
7. Notice in keeping with Hebrew parallelism, Solomon says two similar things in two difference ways, thus —“the fear of the Lord...[and]...the knowledge of the Holy One” are similar if not synonymous concepts...
8. Thus at the very heart of fearing God, is a saving and thriving knowledge of God in Christ—this is why she does all that she does...

Obs.1—this provides instruction to wives

1. Typically speaking, what women need is not another book of womanly duties, but they need to foster the foundational grace of fearing God...
2. Do you desire to increasingly imitate the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 then you must give yourself to those common activities that foster and strengthen the grace of gospel fear...
3. This is what I am afraid concerning so many of our modern day wifely books—they simply reduce their counsel to a string of practical helps while neglecting the issues of the heart...
4. Prov.4:23—“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life...”—how does a wife become a better wife, and a mother a better mother—guard above all else those daily practices that foster and strengthen the fear of God...
5. Practically speaking this means that amidst all of your daily duties and responsibilities, you must make time to read your Bible and pray...
6. Prov.23:17—“Do not let your heart envy sinners, but live in the fear of the LORD all the day...”—that is, live in constant awareness of the every-present eye of God...
7. As you go about your daily routine [even the most mundane of tasks], do so with an eye to the smile and frown of God...

Obs.2—this provides instruction to potential wives

1. Here I speak to single young ladies and their parents—what is to be our predominant focus as we attempt to prepare our daughters for marriage...
2. If at the heart of a virtuous woman is the fear of God, then it seems logical that in preparing our daughters for potential wives, above all else this must have prominence...

3. Are we to prepare our daughters with reference to domestic skills—yes—all that’s potentially helpful to her as a wife and mother ought to be fostered and pursued...
4. But would we so prepare them domestically, socially, academically, and even physically—and yet fail to prepare them spiritually...

B. She is unashamedly a woman

1. The text calls her a “virtuous woman [or wife]”—the Hebrew word can be translated either “woman” or “wife” as the terms are interchangeable...
2. This is further underscored in that both in Hebrew and Greek, the same words are used for “woman” and “wife...”
3. Gen.2:23-24—“And Adam said: This *is* now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh...”
4. Here we have the first time the terms “woman” and “wife” used in Scripture—notice they both are inseparable from Adam...
5. Thus our English word “woman” is a compound of two words “womb” and “man”—which refers to the fact that she had her origination out from man...
6. Thus a virtuous woman unashamedly finds her identity as inseparably related to her husband—she is a woman or a wife...
7. Let me clarify—Am I saying that unless a woman is married and thus a wife, she is somehow less than a woman...
8. No—I am not saying this—in the mysterious purposes of God He sometimes keeps this relationship from a man or woman for purposes only known to Him...
9. But what I am saying is, if sin and the curse had not so marred this world, singleness and barrenness would not have existed...

Obs.1—this extends a sharp rebuke to a worldly woman

1. There are those who would look at this description and find supposed validation for a woman who supposedly has it all...
2. Here we are told, is a woman who refuses to be bound to traditional responsibilities that would focus upon and within the home...
3. The 21st century American woman is doing all that she can to liberate herself from being a woman—she’s determined to find her identity independent of a man and children...
4. But such a philosophy is obviously foreign to this passage—for even a surface reading of this text shows that the primary orientation of a virtuous women is toward her home...
5. This is something we shall see in upcoming lessons, but suffice it for now, notice that all that she does outside of the home has its end in the home...

Obs.2—this extends a subtle rebuke to some Christian women

1. It’s possible that in the midst of all of your various responsibilities, you can loose sight of your fundamental identity—a wife...
2. Before you are a mother you are a wife—thus amidst all of your motherly duties you mustn’t loose sight of your husband...
3. Thus directly after describing the virtuous woman as rare and valuable, we read in v11—“the heart of her husband safely trusts her...[v12] she does him good and not evil all the days of her life...”
4. Yes, she seeks wool and flax [v13]—she is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar...she also rises while it is yet might, etc...
5. But before all of this she unashamedly finds her identity as a wife—and accordingly her foremost focus is her husband...

C. She is of exceptional value

1. The word translated “virtuous” is a rich word that can have slightly various meanings—it’s translated “excellent” (NAS), “worthy” (AV), and “noble character” (NIV)...
2. At its very heart is the idea of strength or courage—in fact 56 times it’s translated “army”—elsewhere its rendered—“strength, power, might, and valor...”
3. Thus fundamentally it brings together the idea of valor [bravery] and nobility—a brave woman, a courageous woman, a noble woman...
4. Thus asking the rhetorical question—“who can find a virtuous wife”—we have a statement concerning her importance—“for her worth is far above rubies...”
5. The word rendered “worth” refers to her value—the word rendered “rubies” can be translated “jewels, rubies, or pearls...”
6. But we must keep in mind that not all women or all wives, are of exceptional value—notice again the text —“who can find a virtuous wife. For her worth is far above rubies...”

Obs.1—this has something to say to husbands

1. You must not neglect your wife
2. You must not misuse your wife
3. You must highly esteem your wife

Obs.2—this has something to say to potential husbands

1. Young men I want to end our study with a final word to you—what would you say if your father left you an inheritance of a great estate—with a grand palace...
2. Let me suggest to you that exists an inheritance that only your heavenly father can give, that far exceeds all the mansions of a billion worlds...
3. Notice Prov.19:14—“Houses and riches *are* an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife *is* from the LORD...”
4. Far better to live in a shack with a prudent and virtuous wife, then to dwell in the finest mansion, with a foolish woman...
5. V30—“Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised...”

Prov.18:22—“He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD...”